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## ‘Ode to a suburban garden’: Eccentric narrative and *The Stranger’s Child*

In his review of *The Stranger’s Child* for the *Guardian*, Theo Tait (2011) contends that Alan Hollinghurst’s fifth novel ‘treads much of the same ground as its predecessors: class and money, buried histories of gay life in this country, the dreary provinces and the exciting metropolis, with forays into architecture and Victoriana’. To readers of Hollinghurst’s fiction all of these are indeed familiar themes, yet in his latest offering metropolitan life is almost entirely passed over. With most of its action taking place on the fringes of London, *The Stranger’s Child* is, for Hollinghurst, a peculiarly decentred – or eccentric – narrative. This excision of the city parallels the novel’s structure. The five temporally discontinuous sections of *The Stranger’s Child* are nearly all proximate to key events and legal landmarks in twentieth-century British history: the World Wars, the General Strike, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the legalization of civil partnerships. Like the almost absent metropolis, these events are rarely described directly, even if their influence is felt markedly on the novel’s mainly domestic ex-urban settings. The novel’s conjunction of spatial and temporal marginality is not coincidental but purposeful: the narrative eccentricity of *The Stranger’s Child* is indicative of how any history of the margins necessitates a concern with marginalised histories.

How exactly does the novel’s focus on the suburban and the provincial relate to the telling of history and, in particular, the uncovering of ‘buried histories of gay life in this country’? On the one hand, Hollinghurst appears concerned to present a suburban history – a rare thing indeed as the suburbs are so often perceived as being without history and therefore value (Webster, 2000, 2). But as the authors of *Edgelands* Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts assert, it makes little sense to conceive of liminal landscapes as outside of history: they are ‘always on the move’, and ‘as difficult to pin down and define as poetry’ (2011, 6-7). *The Stranger’s Child* is attuned to the ambiguities of these peripheral places; they are never presumed to be ‘pure’, but are characterised by ongoing negotiations of their position between city and country and the ever fine differentiations of class and status. Hollinghurst is also pre-occupied by the continually shifting reputations of particular landscapes and architectural styles. Equally, though, the novel focuses on how certain mythic associations render these sites timeless. For while places and

buildings are ever at the mercy of the vagaries of taste and time, literary production frequently situates them in an arrested, mythic dimension. Often in English writing this realm is a coalescence of fantasies of Englishness. In the novel the central mythic construction of place is provided by a poem inspired by a fairly unremarkable garden in suburban Stanmore. Rather in the manner of Rupert Brooke's 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester', the poem evokes a threatened or lost English rural idyll. Ironically enough, the same poem prompts a search for the actual garden that inspired its composition. Hollinghurst's suburban history is constituted by precisely this kind of dialogue between historic and mythic conceptions of place. As well as demonstrating how places are, in Doreen Massey's words, 'temporal and not just spatial: as set in time as well as place' (1995, 186), *The Stranger's Child* is alert to how competing definitions of places always also involve competing historical narratives. As Massey declares, 'the identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* these histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant' (emphasis in original).

On the other hand, exploration of these suburban landscapes both reveals and obscures queer goings on. The poem in question is apparently inspired less by the garden than by sexual frolics which took place within its borders, or perhaps just beyond them. There is in the modest architecture of the periphery the possibility of secrecy, with its way of 'always resolving itself into nooks' (Hollinghurst, 2011, 8), and then, always just beyond it, the promise of a queer pastoral – or, rather, sylvan – idyll. Yet Hollinghurst demonstrates the challenges of recovering queer suburban histories, and suggests a new method for examining such places that has something in common with their very peripherality. Unlike the seemingly more promising metropolitan architectures and landscapes of his earlier novels, with their rich queer archaeologies, surveying these peripheries directly seems to yield little more than a residual melancholy. It is by perusing them obliquely and eccentrically, that is, to consider always what lies beyond or outside, as well as the personalities and narratives which are obscured by those which have become central and established, that the suburbs begin reveal some of their secrets, while retaining much of their mystery.

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Hollinghurst's earlier work is sometimes held to be emblematic of the irresistible attraction of the city for provincial gay men. The New Zealand writer Peter Wells has written about how London – specifically Hollinghurst's – enacts a centripetal draw that reaches right around the globe:

Like many a provincial pouf (of which, if truth be dreadfully told, most of us are, and must be: the great cities of the world are endlessly replenished by new arrivals on every bus, every plane) I made my pilgrimage to the homosexual Rome of my day – the sultry and sardonic London depicted in *The Swimming Pool Library*. (Wells, 1994, cited in Altman, 2000, 37)

For Wells, a universal provinciality is produced by the sheer intensity of Will Beckwith's London, which becomes the thrilling epicentre of the gay universe, its queer terrains so easily traversed, its bounteous pleasures so readily exploited by its dilettante protagonist. The same lure is echoed in *The Stranger's Child* by the situation of Paul Bryant, a young provincial man tentatively looking for textual evidence of queer worlds. His reading material, in 1967, is somewhat more allusive than Wells's: the movie magazine *Films and Filming*. In particular, Paul is drawn to the magazine's personals section, which outlines a 'world of "bachelors", many of them with "flats", and most of those flats in London' (286). Later Paul speaks of '*nostalgie du pavé*', the 'panicky longing' to be back in London (488), though this is not an original sentiment but an expression borrowed from his more worldly – and evidently better-read – lover Peter. In any case London succeeds quite utterly in concealing its charms. Only three equally unappealing vistas are provided: first, a 'gusty defile off Tottenham Court Road', where Paul chances across a rain-bedraggled, elderly Daphne Jacobs (372); secondly, a mildewed basement staffroom of the *Times Literary Supplement*; and thirdly, a nondescript private-members club, the venue for a somewhat laborious memorial service. Absent are the subterranean gymnasia, dance clubs and porn cinemas, and the furtive connections made on public transport and in private gardens that so energise the depictions of London in *The Swimming-pool Library*, *The Spell* and *The Line of Beauty*.

If these novels prompt desire for centripetal movement – arguably like so much gay narrative (Weston, 1995; Dines, 2009) – it would be inaccurate to cast *The Stranger's Child* as being driven by a contrary, centrifugal momentum. Nor would it

be quite fair to consider the novel's suburban lives and locations as being under the scrutiny of a putative metropolitan-based elite culture, which perceives these suburban histories coming into view as light from a distant star informs an astronomer about its past. The novel's eccentricity involves the devolution of authority over perceptions of the margin, which in any case is not singular but several. More precisely, then, the novel considers conflicting perspectives on multiple peripheries. What the novel ultimately seems to value most is the perspective of the decentred – the perception of outliers who look outward, but who do so without trying to capture the sense of a place in its entirety or in essence. It is an approach that corresponds with the considerable body of English writing at the turn of the twentieth century which turned its attention to the emergent social and physical spaces of the suburbs. According to Lynne Hapgood, such writing typically 'recognises the resistance of the suburbs to a totalising definition' (2005, 4). Despite their evident ordinariness, the suburbs always suggest a 'hinterland of inaccessible meaning'; their significance can 'only be recuperated through a synthesis of a multiplicity of perceptions' (2005, 1).

Precisely because it is so preoccupied with presenting multiple perspectives – the first section alone is focalised through five different characters – delicate strokes are needed when sketching out the various suburban domains depicted in *The Stranger's Child*. A degree of suppleness is required as well since understandings of suburbanity are culturally specific and because these environments, particularly in the hundred years or so charted by the novel, have undergone considerable change.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the novel reflects on how areas ordinarily considered rural or provincial come to be associated with suburban environments; in so doing Hollinghurst connects with the concerns of turn-of-the-century fiction about the expansion of the suburbs. Equally, though, *The Stranger's Child* considers how the suburban landscapes and architecture of a former era come to be perceived by later generations – and literature's role in shaping these visions. The novel's title foregrounds its own awareness of literature's influence over understandings of place. For sure, the verse of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* from which the novel's title is taken is suggestive of the way meanings, memories and values invested in places are temporary:

Till from the garden and the wild  
A fresh association blow,  
And year by year the landscape grow  
Familiar to the stranger's child (CI, lines 17-20).

Yet, the very articulation of these lines indicates the persistence of less-than-fresh associations established by earlier writing. In one scene early in the novel, section CI of *In Memoriam* is read aloud in full and is consumed rapturously by the Sawle family some 60 years after the poem's first publication, with the speaker indicating the close correspondence between his audience's own garden and the one invoked by Tennyson. However, this comforting congruence is about to be upset by the speaker himself. By composing a poem named after the house and its grounds he ensures it will be hard to associate the garden with Tennyson again. Hollinghurst rather underscores this disruption by another stroke of the pen: during the Tennyson reading, a sudden bout of bad weather forces the party to abandon the garden and retreat inside. It is as if the stage has been cleared; the time has come for new scripts to be written. Yet, in quite the same way as Tennyson's work had done, these materials go on to transfix later generations of readers.

The novel's first section, 'Two Acres', narrates the events of a long weekend in 1913 which takes place at the eponymous home of the reasonably prosperous Sawle family. The liminal position of the Sawles' house in Stanmore on the north-eastern edge of Middlesex is pronounced from the offset. In what is nearly the first speech act in the novel, the young Daphne Sawle comments to the arriving guest Cecil Valance, who has been escorted from the local railway station by her older brother George: 'He brought you the country way. There's the country way and the suburban way' (5). The appraisal marks an awareness of the acute marginality of 'Two Acres', but also of how perspective can so easily alter an understanding of such locales. Indeed, Daphne adds – somewhat to puncture any ambitions her brother might have had of enhancing his home's standing in the eyes of their aristocratic visitor – that the latter route 'doesn't create such a fine impression. You just go up Stanmore Hill' (5). Latterly, all three characters determine their current location to be suburban: George distinguishes the candour of discourse at Cambridge with the insistent courtesy of suburban chatter (25); Cecil flippantly

alludes to the erotic opportunities that might be found in the suburbs (18); and Daphne indeed experiences her first sexual stirrings 'in the faint glimmer of the suburban night' (96). Yet none of these admittedly emphatic assertions of Stanmore's suburbanity preclude the possibility of other interpretations. The poem that Cecil writes that same weekend, which takes the name of the Sawles' house for its title, transfigures its source material into other imaginary landscapes, Edenic, pastoral, sylvan, each suggesting deeply private experience that simultaneously metonymises the English nation. What is later snidely dismissed as Cecil's 'ode to a suburban garden' rather demonstrates the potential multivalency of the margins. Of course other kinds of literary material – Forster's early fiction for instance – present a much narrower view; for this very reason *The Stranger's Child* enters into a contestatory relationship with such writing.

The second section jumps forward to 1926 and to Corley Court, the Berkshire seat of the Valance family. Cecil is ten years' dead following his fatal wounding at Maricourt and Daphne, now Lady Valance, resides at Corley Court after marrying Cecil's younger brother Dudley. During a publicity reading Hollinghurst complained that reviewers had pigeonholed *The Stranger's Child* as a 'country house novel'; only one of its five sections, he pointed out, has an aristocratic family seat as its setting.<sup>2</sup> It is though easy to see why such an appellation has stuck: the novel's first three sections all centre on homes which, it would be safe to say, are relatively genteel. Each house is at least in sight of the countryside; each hosts festivities which spill out onto generously proportioned gardens. In addition, the three houses are linked, in sometimes quite convoluted ways, by a number of family connections: George Sawle is present at the three venues, as is his sister, though Daphne is in possession of a different surname on each occasion.

While the novel inescapably connects with the tradition of country house fiction (see Morrison, 2011), it is perhaps more helpful to consider *The Stranger's Child* a *suburban* novel. Though Corley Court is undeniably located in rural Berkshire, its fate is closely tied up with that of 'Two Acres'. With a suburbanite becoming the mistress of Corley Court, *The Stranger's Child* might seem to be rerunning a distinctly Forsterian theme: what Stuart Christie (2005, 22) has described as the concession of the country to the 'suburburb', Forster's term for the rapidly expanding and indeed somewhat elastic physical territory and cultural

purview of the advancing middle classes. The Forster text which *The Stranger's Child* is in closest dialogue with is without doubt *The Longest Journey* (1907). In a manner not dissimilar to *The Stranger's Child*, Forster's second novel is organised into three sections defined by location: 'Cambridge', 'Sawston', and 'Wiltshire'. In *The Longest Journey*, the worlds of the university, the suburb and the countryside correspond to divergent coordinates – their respective inhabitants are committed to quite different values: intellectual endeavour, social convention and a close relationship with the natural world. Hollinghurst's novel begins by drawing the same kinds of distinctions. As a Cambridge undergraduate – and newly confirmed Apostle – George echoes Forster's protagonist Rickie Elliot's understanding of the distinctly different priorities of suburban conversation on the one hand, and on the other, the Conversazione Society (of which Forster himself had been a member).

Subsequently, however, Hollinghurst scrambles – or, to use a term that spatters both *The Stranger's Child* and Forster's fiction, *muddles* – these locations. Notably, both novels feature a boys' public school, but in *The Longest Journey*, it is situated in suburban Sawston; in *The Stranger's Child*, the location is provided by Corley Court, which has been opened as a school following the Second World War. Hollinghurst openly acknowledges his engagement with Forster by furnishing the fourth section of *The Stranger's Child* with an epigraph taken from *The Longest Journey*: 'I see the respectable mansion. I see the smug fortress of culture. The doors are shut. But on the roof the children go dancing for ever.' (367) In Forster's novel the lines are inspired by a boy's naked cavorting on 'the summit of Cadover' (Forster, 1984, 119), a country house in Wiltshire. In Hollinghurst's the same lines follow Peter Rowe spying two pupils' illicit adventures on the school roof (and a report encountered later tells of George and Cecil's expeditions in exactly the same place). The parallels are obvious and numerous – both school and country house may be construed as 'respectable mansions' and 'smug fortress[es] of culture'; the boys in each instance are witnessed by establishment figures who are sympathetic toward such insouciance, though both figures are thwarted in their ambitions to articulate such defiance in their own writing – perhaps because they are too romantically involved with the establishment they represent. Hollinghurst's school is nearly every bit as dispiritingly conservative as Forster's, but its 'relocation' in *The Stranger's Child* to the Country House hardly indicates the triumph of a suburban 'mentality'. In any



case, Hollinghurst's novel does not present a seesawing of class fortunes but – *contra* Forster – mutually imbricated decline.

Indeed, the history of Corley Court is rather reflected by the plight of buildings and institutions in Stanmore. Daphne's declaration in 1913 regarding Stanmore's Priory, once occupied by Queen Adelaide, and now a school for girls – 'a sad fate!' (18) – seems histrionic on first reading, but it of course foreshadows Corley Court's destiny. (In a further parallel, the Priory was subsequently taken over by the Royal Air Force in the 1920s; during the Second World War, Corley Court is requisitioned, and an airbase is then established in its vicinity.) 'Two Acres' is abandoned and faces demolition and redevelopment by the 1980s; its neighbour, 'Mattocks', goes the same way two decades later. Partly this decline is symptomatic of a twentieth-century disregard for Victorian architecture. Much is made of the elimination of the more fanciful elements of Corley Court's ornamentation: its high 'jelly-mould' domed ceilings are the first things to be concealed by the zealous modernisation of its interior that begins in the 1920s. By the 1960s, however, the building is graced by a revival of interest in Victoriana taking hold in Britain. Whilst received opinion insists that Corley Court is 'a Victorian monstrosity, and one of the very worst' (268), Peter Rowe is shown to be eagerly researching its history, and his involvement with the campaign, led by John Betjeman, to save another neo-gothic pile of polychromatic brickwork, St Pancras Station, suggests Corley's future as a structure is reasonably secure. The fate of its junior relations in Stanmore is perhaps indicative of the selective nature of late twentieth-century interest in Victorian architecture but also of the fact that the likes of 'Two Acres' proved too small and inconveniently located for use by institutions and too large and uncomfortable to be redeveloped as residential accommodation. (However, see Wickstead, 2013, on heritage and the English suburbs.)

The novel's later sections introduce yet further suburban landscapes. The third section is partly situated in Foxleigh, an imaginary Berkshire town in the vicinity of Corley. While being only a smallish market town, Foxleigh still has its own diverse suburban landscapes, which are traversed on foot by Paul Bryant, the bank clerk who later comes to write Cecil Valance's biography. There is something disorientating about these places. They seem at once familiar and peculiar; their stolid existence belies something transcendent. For Paul, contemporary forms are

mildly uncanny. His digs are located in a development 'out of town ... past the new secondary modern' (264), where the daily lives of residents are unremarkable and recognisably suburban: lawn-mowing and television-watching are principal activities in his street which, rather unpromisingly, is shaped like a 'noose'. Yet this post-war suburban landscape is slightly unnerving for being new and undesignated: 'the houses were a strange economy that there wasn't a word for, built in threes, two semis with the central house in common, like segments of a terrace' (264). This dislocation would appear to be a recapitulation of earlier responses to emergent suburban forms which struggled to reconcile their ordinariness and apparent inscrutability. Pondering the streets and houses of a south London suburb in 1906, Edward Thomas writes:

The eye strains at them as at Russian characters which are known to stand for something beautiful or terrible; but there is no translator: it sees a thousand things that at the moment of seeing are significant, but they obliterate one another. They propose themselves as a problem to the mind.  
(Thomas, 1906, cited in Hapgood, 2005, 1)

These correspondences indicate, once again, how the novel is working within a tradition of suburban fiction. No wonder then that longer-established suburban landscapes – those which had originally beguiled Thomas, perhaps – prove to be more disturbing to Paul. On the opposite edge of Foxleigh stands the Victorian villa of Paul's boss. The house's situation disorients Paul: it seems strange that a place so countrified exists in such close proximity to the town. The villa's name, 'Carraveen', similarly pulls him in different directions: it prompts drab domestic associations but is 'clearly romantic too', conjuring travel and holidays (251). The house seems partly to stand outside of time as well. Despite hearing the church clock strike, the time of day is 'indefinable'; 'time, like the light, seemed somehow viscous' (251). Paul's seduction by the house approaches sublimity: he feels 'delicately stifled' by some quality of it he cannot fully grasp.

This disquieting experience has a definitively literary origin. Elsewhere, Paul demonstrates that he has been brought up, like so many of his generation, to be able to recount reams of English poetry. Perhaps to show that learning by rote does not necessarily enhance sensitivity – or perhaps rather to explain the uncanniness he

feels upon recognising something he cannot put his finger on – Paul fails to make a connection between a poem that is English both in its provenance and focus and the setting that so beguiles him. The ‘long brambly strands of dog-roses swayed in the breeze along the top of the hedge’ (250) that he sees as he approaches Carraveen seem almost tauntingly to echo Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester’: ‘Unkempt about those hedges blows / An English unofficial rose’ (verse 2, lines 8-9). While contemplating another Victorian building, Peter Rowe names the quality that eludes Paul: Englishness. Gazing up at Corley Court backlit by the moon, Peter similarly locates the scene temporally and renders it timeless: ‘it was windless and warm, the near stasis of an ideal English summer’ (363). With the observation ‘the stars thickened’ there is too the same impression as that experienced earlier by Paul of the atmosphere solidifying. Englishness, the novel implies, is a set of still images, or, as the word ‘ideal’ suggests, distillations. The seeming timelessness of English scenery is less to do with their supposedly unchanging nature over centuries, than it is with the way they are so readily observed as *scenes*.

Brooke’s poem is comprised of a nostalgic slideshow of such English scenes, many of which invoke time only to communicate timelessness, for example: ‘Hear the cool lapse of hours pass / Until the centuries blend and blur’ (verse 3, lines 14-15), and the first half of its famous concluding couplet, ‘yet / Stands the Church clock at ten to three?’ (verse 4, lines 24-25). The poem also attempts to distil a pure Englishness by its acute focus on a tiny domain of fondly remembered locations: not all of England, not all of Cambridgeshire indeed; only ‘the lovely hamlet of Grantchester’. Of course the attempt to produce a perfect Englishness is undermined somewhat by the hyperbolic roll call of surrounding settlements, each more scrofulous than the last – ‘And Ditton girls are mean and dirty, / And there’s none in Harston under thirty’, and so on. Thus the project of ‘Grantchester’ can hardly be said to articulate an Englishness that is *representative* of the nation, or which tries to celebrate the English. Rather, the poem dwells on how elaborations of Englishness – particularly those produced at some remove from a remembered English idyll – may well be territorializing, distorting and intensely partial. In the poem Englishness is predicated on and haunted by that which its speaker wishes to escape – Germanic modernity (Ebbatson, 2005, 148-52). In fact it is tempting to consider the fevered reverie of ‘Grantchester’ to be at least partly satiric, though admittedly it is harder to

make such a move stick in the light of Brooke's more sober offerings on the theme elsewhere, in particular the opening lines of the 1914 poem, 'The Soldier': 'If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.' (Verse 1, lines 1-3)

'Grantchester' impresses itself on *The Stranger's Child* principally through Cecil Valance's poem 'Two Acres'. Valance is evidently modelled on the author of 'Grantchester' and 'The Soldier'. The soldier-poet Valance perishes the same year as Brooke, in 1915. Like Brooke, Valance seems to have been lauded in the early stages of the War (and like Brooke upon his death he is quoted in *The Times* by none other than Churchill). Echoing the way Brooke's rather slender body of writing fell from favour as the War gouged its bloody course, with the darker visions of Owen, Sassoon et al. making his poems seem appallingly sentimental, the popularity of Valance's work appears to have suffered over time. As his brother-in-law George gently puts it in 1926, 'I just wonder if people aren't growing sick of the War' (162). While Valance is conspicuously less talented than Brooke, their literary reputations seem equally pinioned by their association with patriotism and invocations of Englishness.<sup>3</sup> 'Two Acres', as 'Grantchester' arguably is for Brooke, is Valance's single most widely known and enduring poem. Even the likes of interior decorator Eva Riley, who needs help spelling 'Piccadilly', can reel off a line: 'Two blessed acres of English ground' (123). Indeed, the same line is repeated towards the end of the novel as evidence of Valance being 'a first-rate example of a second-rate poet who enters the common consciousness more deeply than many greater masters' (527). This evaluation is made in 2008, but not long after his death the same kind of misgivings about the relationship between literary merit and popularity are expressed. Asked to rate Valance as a poet, his literary executor vacillates: 'Oh, I think no one would question [...] do you? That a number, really a goodly few, of Cecil's poems [...] will be read for as long as there are readers with an ear for English music, and an eye for English things' (162). The narrative voice adds dryly, 'The larger claim seemed rather to evaporate in its later clauses'. At best the designation 'English' operates as a form of special pleading; at worst it constitutes an embarrassed acknowledgement of Valance's broad appeal.

Although conscious of the diffident relationship between Englishness and literariness, *The Stranger's Child* is really more concerned with how certain

landscapes, and particular visions or perspectives of these landscapes, come to represent Englishness. Once again, 'Grantchester' foregrounds the distortions that inevitably arise in any attempt to encapsulate Englishness in a tiny location so invested in personal experience. With 'Two Acres', this dynamic is rendered more complex, for the experiences of others are at stake. A range of vexed questions are considered: Who exactly is the poem for? Precisely whose experience of the location does the poem communicate? What does it mean to have a deeply personal site metonymised as a national landscape by a third party? The Sawles, unsurprisingly, are partly flattered by Valance's condescension. They even invite it: while feeling anxious about sharing his childhood play-spaces with a fellow Apostle, George seems willing to concede mastery over them – he longs for Cecil, 'with his poet's eye' (74), to give them credence. The name of the house is also an encouragement: already seemingly a quotation, and denoting a quantity rather than a quality, 'Two Acres' appears as a readily tradable, fungible commodity.

But more often than not the Sawles are deeply ambivalent about the transfiguration of their home and what seems like the co-optation of private experiences and memories. From the very beginning, Cecil's proprietorial air causes them to bristle: the first time Daphne's hears his voice she is 'disconcerted' by the way 'it seemed so quickly and decisively to take control of their garden and their house' (4); similarly, the first vision of Cecil that forces itself on her mother Freda is how he appears to 'have been coming in from his own garden' (11). The illusion of the poem's being a gift, a genuinely occasional piece written in honour of the house and its occupants, is quickly dispelled, yet the Sawles' sense that they have a claim on the work lingers. By the 1920s Daphne is able to say breezily that the poem 'has entered the language'; it belongs to all. This is her public position, and even what she tells herself – it enables her to distance herself from her first infatuation. Yet the statement caps what seems an involuntary recollection of the anguish of knowing that 'the most precious thing she had ever been given' – 'Two Acres' was scrawled in her visitors book – was not hers to own. She seems to go over again the part of the story she holds back from telling others: how all too quickly others were reading a different version to the one 'given' to her, the later one appearing in an elite poetry journal 'a good deal rewritten' (172). George indicates that some of the rewritten elements – particularly those that seem premonitory of war – rather betray 'Two

Acres': 'For us it was a bit like a finding a gun-emplacement at the bottom of the garden' (163). He contends, moreover, that the martial elements turn 'Two Acres' into a war poem of 'a somewhat depressing kind' (163), one which glorifies conflict and suggests a nation eager for battle. His mother's mourning of her otherwise uncelebrated eldest son Hubert is, however, a kind of riposte to the poem. Freda, indignant that her own loss has gone unrecognised amongst all the lavish grief for Cecil, substitutes a heroic landscape with a homely one. She finds it 'rending' that Hubert will never again set foot in 'her own modest landscape', and so sets about reimagining Ivry Wood, where he fell in 1917, as her 'own little spinney'. Freda's personal, private vision of 'Two Acres' replaces the national landscape articulated by 'Two Acres' the poem, and represented by the war graves – the foreign field that is forever England – where Hubert is finally interred, and which, it seems, Freda will never visit.

Just as the fascination with Cecil goes on long after his death, so continues this contest over 'Two Acres'. Bent on writing the definitive, uncensored biography of Cecil, Paul Bryant seeks out the house that inspired the famous poem. Paul has only the poem to guide him to his goal; amusing scenes ensue of him stumbling around Stanmore with lines such as 'goatfoot paths and mimic tor' as his only directions (380). While such confidence in his own project approaches absurdity, Paul's employment of Cecil's writing as a guide is quite fitting. Indeed, Paul's desire to comprehend and understand the house echoes Cecil's masterful attitude exhibited some six decades previous. His visit even takes an explicitly possessive turn: overtaken by a 'territorial' 'urge' Paul urinates in the garden; the house itself seems 'resistant to being looked at', Paul 'somehow [...] couldn't take the house in', so he takes photos 'so as to see it all later' (380); and finally, the house's emptiness encourages him to think of it as his (385). But he balks at entering the building after seeing that, against expectations, it is alarm-protected, and thus owned by someone else after all. The name of the company which provides the system is, ironically, 'Albion Security', as if the thing that protects the house, but which also renders it inscrutable, is its involvement in a mythic England. Paul responds somewhat petulantly, determining that there is really 'little enough to see': the house is a 'hulk', its windows 'ponder blankly' (386-7). This bathetic conclusion to his visit – his realisation that the house is for his purposes empty – is a result of the narrowness of

Paul's project, and his own self-importance and sentimentality. Grotesquely, Paul presumes that the house might act as a willing agent: he considers his own self-satisfaction when recalling how he thought the house would maintain a look of self-regard, showing an appreciation of being admired. (His arrogance and his peculiar trust in the sentience of houses surfaces again during his interview with Jonah, who valeted for Cecil at 'Two Acres' all those years ago, when he contends that the ex-servant's suburban house will, as a result of his work, attract 'an interest and distinction it didn't know it had' (404).) For Paul, the house is only animated to the extent to which it might aid him in writing his biography of Cecil. It seems that Paul's earlier apprehension of Carraveen, that other building shrouded by associations of Englishness, was more benign. Instead of him animating the house, it rather paralysed him. Consequently he was quite incapable of the sort of instrumentality he brings to 'Two Acres'. Yet both responses demonstrate a failure to appreciate that the objects beheld are meaningful largely because they are literary creations, part of the mythic fabric of Englishness.

Thus the novel's representation of houses always involves a concern about how houses are looked at. Observing houses, the novel also seems to suggest, is a rather masculine habit. Women tend to look the other way. The distinction might be attributable to the different ways that men and women inhabit the home: in more than one instance the novel shows how domestic duties require women to be inside the house looking out, as when Freda beholds the approach of Cecil. In earlier suburban fiction, this outward-projecting perspective is rather a masculine pursuit, characteristic of a desire to escape the despised feminine realm of the suburbs. Lynne Hapgood contends that in the early novels of Forster, and in the fiction of Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas,

the suburbs become a kind of shadowy borderland of ambiguous meaning or a parallel universe of appearances, beyond or behind which something else, wilder, deeper and truer, can be found by those who desire to discover it. This 'wild space' is a site of masculinity, where adventures, boyish pranks and carefree wanderings can be imagined; more importantly, it promises an encounter with a metaphysical or sexual sublime. (Hapgood, 2005, 61-2)

*The Stranger's Child* shares something with the work of Forster et al.: it imagines a masculine – and distinctly homosexual – ‘wild space’ in or beyond these ‘shadowy borderlands’. These spaces, necessarily, are shadowy themselves: George and Cecil, and then Peter and Paul, understandably seek seclusion to have sex, yet their physical passions never quite come into view. The motivation seems less a form of prudery on the part of Hollinghurst – hardly something that one would associate with his writing – than an appreciation of the very mysteriousness of these spaces and experiences. As Paul comments as he and Peter press into the far reaches of Carraveen’s starlit garden, ‘something about the dark kept them apart as naturally as it promised to keep them together’ (331). Peter later observes that the cricket slipcatch at the very edge of the inbound area of Corley ‘was another of those sites where half-glimpsed fantasies, always in the air, touched down questionably for a minute, and then flitted on’ (357). For the participants, then, there is an understanding, and almost a pleasure, that their exploits cannot ever be fully comprehended, even by themselves. (Similarly, there is pleasure for the reader in Peter and Paul’s lack of awareness of the many correspondences between their adventures and those of Cecil and George.) There is always something about these suburban scenes which evades understanding and which remains mysterious.

There is no sense, then, that the spaces adumbrated by Hollinghurst which lie ‘beyond or behind’ the suburb setting are in some sense ‘truer’. Instead, the novel makes a distinction between two very different ways of looking. One seeks to fully comprehend, to record and to possess a place, as in Cecil’s and then Paul’s attention to ‘Two Acres’, or in Cecil’s imperious (though possibly self-parodying) declaration ‘Middlesex will be all before us’ (379). The novel stresses how the urge to create definitive records about places and past lives is always liable to end in failure, not least because no certainty can ever be established over experiences which were themselves characterised by uncertainty. Peter Rowe asks if ‘the era of hearsay’ about past queer lives was ‘about to give way to an age of documentation’ (363). If Paul’s biography of Cecil is anything to go by, the answer must be equivocal: the document Paul produces, *England Trembles* (the title is taken from ‘Two Acres’), is largely derived from hearsay, or reliant on hearsay following the retention or loss of documentation. In any case, the queer content of much of this material is always wonderfully elusive. George finds it amusing that ‘Two Acres’



contains a queer secret; the early versions of the poem shown to him by Cecil, and seemingly inspired by their woodland frolics, inspire him to comment how 'The English idyll had its secret paragraphs, priapic figures in the trees and bushes' (159).<sup>4</sup> George may not be correct to trust that the scandalous lines have been lost forever: quite possibly it is this material that is recovered from Jonah's suburban home by the academic Nigel Dupont, who understands it to comprise a 'queer manifesto'. Probably this is a dig at the over-reaching queer academic; anyway, the really interesting bits are never revealed to the reader. Cecil and George's correspondence, or Cecil's final private poems, which are both said to be even racier, also remain undiscovered. The bonfire aiding a house clearance in the novel's final chapter hints that they have been lost forever, but there can be no certainty either way. The suburban home set for demolition has at least yielded up the consolation of Harry Hewitt's letter-book of thank you messages from his 'darling boy' Hubert Sawle, whom Hewitt bombarded with lavish gifts and unwanted sexual advances. The record of this 'affair' between these men who lived in neighbouring suburban houses and who are evidently marginal to the main interest of Cecil and George's relationship (or, rather, Cecil himself), still encourages its reader, the antiquarian book dealer Rob Salter, to try to 'picture the displays of physical affection' (554) His question 'what were they?' can only be answered by speculations about these marginal intimacies.

Salter's musings, which virtually conclude the novel, are representative of a second way of looking that has as much to do with feeling as seeing, and which is driven by an appreciation of mystery, of what cannot be known, of what has evaded record. The novel also opens with what might well be described as a 'peripheral vision' – that which looks out to the margins, but which is also sensitive to what lies at the very borders of both perception and comprehension. In the twilit garden of 'Two Acres' Daphne awaits the arrival of Cecil accompanied by George. She observes how 'something in the time of day held her, with its hint of mystery she had so far overlooked'; as she is drawn away to the end of the garden anything looked at closely 'seemed to give itself back to the day with a secret throb of colour' (3, 4). This is a recurrent motif: how close scrutiny of objects and places fails to elucidate their significance, but yields instead only a further sense of secrecy. The objects and scenes in question are repeatedly depicted as being on the verge of colour in the

half-light, as if in a perpetual state of imminence. For example, in the gardens of Corley, 'There was no colour, but the garden seemed more and more on the brink of it in the moonlight, as if dim reds and purples might shyly reveal themselves amongst the grey' (213). And then, in the dour light of Cecil's tomb, the colours of the stained-glass windows 'had become a dignified secret', a 'renewable mystery' (348). They are all scenes of sexual intrigue in the half-dark: at Corley, with wandering hands the sylphlike Eva tells Daphne how she longs to make her happy; in the chapel, Peter and Paul almost get things going over the prostrate marble statue of Cecil. The inclusion of feminine as well as masculine sexual exploration and incipient knowledge serves rather to counter the misogynist impulses Forster's early fiction. Indeed, the 'secret throb' which is so suggestive of Daphne's imminent sexual awakening urges her onwards and to penetrate the 'masculine conspiracy' from which she is usually excluded. For much of the opening section she strains almost agonizingly at the threshold of awareness, glimpsing and hearing something of the playful intimacies going on between Cecil and her brother, but without full understanding. Later the boys taunt her with outrageous innuendo ('I'm smoking Cecil's cigar too'); their shocking word 'womanizer' is said to occupy 'the shadowy borders of Daphne's vocabulary' (32-3).

Indeed, it would appear that the insistent, obsessive focus on Cecil, or on queer goings on in the early twentieth century to the exclusion of all other intimacies, is a product of male privilege and reinforces 'masculine conspiracy'. The novel suggests repeatedly how all of its female characters' experiences are side-lined or obscured. If Daphne is the only female character to put pen to paper, her experiences are always predicated on her relationships with men. Even the title of her memoir, *The Short Gallery*, suggests a diminished version of her husband's opus, *The Long Gallery*. In her book, Paul observes, Daphne has offered up a sequence of portraits of the men in her life, rather than focusing on herself. She hopes that something of herself will come through, but notes how she was brought up to believe men did all the important things in life (476-7). Freda's experience is more marginal. The attractive widow is presumed by others to be the object of desire of neighbour Harry Hewitt. Both this and the evidence pointing to the fact that, in Cecil's words, Hewitt is 'the most arrant sodomite in Harrow' (74), distracts from any conception of the possibility that she might harbour desires herself. Yet she notes

Hewitt's disinterest in her by recalling the delighted attention her late husband took in the company of women, and the manner in which she observes Hewitt suggests at least an appreciation of the masculine body and a desire for proximity: 'She watched Harry, hoping that in the shunting back of chairs he would sit by her. He took up a small armchair in a masterful hug, with a pleasant effect of tension in his well-trouserred legs as he lifted it out the way' (64). But the most obscure female character of all is most certainly Freda's perpetual consort and fellow widow Clara Kalbeck. This shadowy figure is endured by the Sawle children, and even tries the patience of Freda herself. For Paul Bryant some seventy years later, her presence in Sawle family photographs is similarly a source of irritation, an imposition: 'a figure of no interest who kept demanding attention' (511). Clara is like a deathly, gnostic siren, wreathed in 'light-absorbing black'; ironically enough the decrepit villa where she is ensconced in 1913 is known as 'Lorelei', as though her Germanic presence on the apparent periphery of Two Acres' threatens to distract one from the central project of delineating the existence of an English homoerotic fraternity. Clara's undeniable presence acts as a caution against the perpetuation of the 'masculine conspiracy' by would-be historians and biographers of queer lives. Indeed, the nickname used for her by the Daphne's children, 'Mrs Cow', cannot but help to recall Forster's *The Longest Journey*, with its exclusionary dedication *fratribus*, i.e., to the brothers. The novel's memorable opening line is 'The cow is there': the reader catches *in media res* a philosophical discussion by some Cambridge students about the existence of objects. Their conclusion enables the interlocutors to deny the sentience of other people – particularly suburban women.<sup>5</sup> *The Stranger's Child* never grants access to Clara's thoughts, though the reader might wonder if her attachment to Freda is motivated by more than just loneliness. She is indeed presented at one moment as being indisputably an unthinking thing, when her corpse is discovered by Daphne's young son. Suddenly, Clara seems so much more real than the marmoreal reproduction of Cecil in the Valance family crypt. The suggestion here appears to be that the aggressive desire to cast women like her from view is deeply inhumane, even murderous. But, despite her presence and her motivations being mysterious, inescapably, Mrs Cow is there.

All this intertextuality is not without its risks. James Wood charges Hollinghurst with 'fossicking in fustian' (2013, 311), that is, of indulging in stylistic and

literary antiquarianism. The problem for Wood is not so much that the novel treads 'over English ground that has been well worked' (2013, 319), i.e., sexual repression, and the literary reputations (and sex lives) of First World War poets. Rather, *The Stranger's Child* is just too comfortable with its materials, and therefore lacks the precision and satirical edge of its predecessor, *The Line of Beauty*. Wood finds this cosiness most in evidence when the novel evokes period Englishness. (His disappointment seems also to have something to do with the novel's departure from the city for the comparative somnolence of the Home Counties.) The novel's repetitive 'muddling' – Wood counts six uses of the term – produces, he says, 'a nice English blur'. 'Muddle', Wood contends, 'is a quintessential postwar word; for decades now the country has been "muddling along" in its own post-imperial wake' (2013, 316). This is an odd move, which itself muddles period Englishness with more contemporary concerns. In any case, the term's derivation is distinctly early twentieth century. One of the novel's primary literary referents, not countenanced by Wood, is, once again, Forster's *The Longest Journey*. As numerous scholars (e.g.: Singh, 1986; Langland, 2007; Driscoll, 2009) have observed 'muddle' is something of a leitmotif for Forster which, amongst other things, highlights complacency or self-denial. The term therefore has the potential for critique; it need not be taken as evidence of smugness. As I have already suggested, Hollinghurst's re-deployment of 'muddle' is indicative of a critical reworking of Forster, not mere pastiche. In particular, *The Stranger's Child* complicates Forster's narrow depiction of the suburbs by insisting they are, amongst other things, a well-spring, and repository, of literary invocations of Englishness. The mysteries and muddles that characterise so many of the places and interactions in *The Stranger's Child* also make manifest a scepticism about the presumption that in this 'era of documentation' past intimacies, and the environments in which they occurred, are fully comprehensible. This, though, is not what is most distinctive about Hollinghurst's novel: the same scepticism for sure motivates a good deal of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988). What is distinctive about *The Stranger's Child* is its determined eccentricity, which sees it always looking askance at people and places, presuming that more direct scrutiny marginalises other perspectives and experiences, or ignores how that gaze is always already informed by literary material. Far from being an attempt to seek out a more comfortable environment, as the move from the city to the suburbs is often presumed to be, or simply a quest to chart new terrain previously undocumented by the queer

historian, the novel's peripheral visions continually de-centre dominant figures, narratives and perspectives. Cecil may have boasted that 'Middlesex will be all before us'; the novel's conclusion – amongst ashes and dereliction, and years after the country has ceased to exist – is far more equivocal, and yet, all the more appealing for being so.

## Notes

1. See Dines and Vermeulen (2013, p.5) on differences between English, American and Australian constructions of the suburban, and on how London's long history of suburbanization and the numerous changes to its administrative boundaries as well as the variety of informal demarcations employed in everyday life produce disagreements over the status of many areas.
2. 'Alan Hollinghurst – The Stranger's Child', at Gay's the Word, London, 19 July 2011.
3. Regarding Brooke's fluctuating reputation see Lehmann (1980), Laskowski (1994) and Jones (1999).
4. One of the lines of the public version of the poem retains a queer referent: '*Are Hamadryads ever seen / Between the dancing veils of green...*' (SC, p.505) is a sly allusion to Cecil and George's satyric tussle in the dappled woods (SC, p. 80). It also calculatedly implicates Brooke by echoing these lines from 'Grantchester': 'And clever modern men have seen / A Faun a-peeping through the green, / And felt the Classics were not dead' (verse 3, lines 5-7).
5. Of Agnes, the narrator later declares: 'She is not conscious of her tragedy, and therefore only the gods need weep at it. But it is fair to remember that hitherto she moves as one from whom the inner life has been withdrawn.' (Forster, 1984, p. 199)

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